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PORPHYRY'S 'CAVE OF THE NYMPHS' AND THE GNOSTIC CONTROVERSY

When Porphyry died (about 305 A.D.), his world was in the hands of a pagan tetrarchy; Christianity was soon to furnish it with a dynasty of autocrats. Porphyry had written against the Church on one occasion[1], but in his other writings there are no signs of pervasive animosity, let alone of deep alarm. He has none the less been suspected of discreet attacks[2], and quite legitimately, since it was common in antiquity for polemicists to disdain the very names of their opponents. We should not know (for example) that the most acerbic passages in Plotinus had been written against a group of deviant Christians, were it not for the information supplied by Porphyry and studied in this paper[3].

Porphyry was born in 232 and the treatise studied here is perhaps among the firstfruits of his maturity[4]. Undoubtedly the first survival in a fecund genre, it takes the 'Cave of the Nymphs' from Homer's Ithaca, with its doors for gods and mortals, and turns it into an image of the solar system, a showpiece of symbolic architecture and a poetic icon comparable with Plato's myth of the soul's escape from the prison of the senses. The thesis that its function may have been as much polemic as protreptic will be supported in this paper by analogies with Enneads 2.9, the thirty-third of Plotinus' treatises, which was written against a group of Christian heretics between 263 and 268, while Porphyry was a member of the school. The teaching of these heretics, styled 'Gnostics' in the editorial title, is a parody of that set forth in Porphyry's 'Cave of the Nymphs': they prefer their own apocrypha to the ancients, condemn the specious beauty of the world, affect

[1] On the Adversus Christianos see T. D. BARNES, Porphyry against the Christians: Date and Attribution of the Fragments, J. Theol. St. 24 (1973) 424–442; A. MEREDITH, Porphyry and Julian against the Christians, ANRW II.23.2 (1980) 1119-1149.

[2] See BOUFFARTIQUE's edition of the De Abstinentia I (Paris 1977) 36–7; for anonymous polemics of this period, Arnobius, Contra Gentes 2.11-52 (perhaps against Porphyry) and Eunapius, Vitae Sophistarum 476 Boissonade, where the unnamed "men in black" are Christian monks. On allusions to Christianity in Plotinus see e.g. A. H. ARMSTRONG, Plotinus and Christianity with special reference to II.9.[33].26–83 and V.8.[31].4.27-36, Studia Patristica 20 (1987) 83-86.

[3] On the identity of the Gnostics see C. SCHMIDT, Plotins Stellung zum Gnosticismus (Leiden 1901); H.-C. PUECH, Plotin et les Gnostiques, Entretiens Hardt 5 (1960) 160–190; M. J. EDWARDS, Neglected Texts in the Study of Gnosticism, J. Theol. St. (1990) 26–50; H. M. JACKSON, The Seer Nicotheus and his Lost Apocalypse, Novum Testamentum 32 (1990), 250–277.

[4] Porphyry wrote a work of this type while studying under Plotinus (Vita Plotini 15), and a dating to this time is rendered all the more attractive by the fact that much of his extant writing is demonstrably later (De Abstinentia, Contra Christianos, Sententiae, Ad Marcellam, Vita Plotini and probably Ad Anebonem).

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religion only as a substitute for rational theology, and profess to derive from Plato views unknown to any Greek.

Scholars are never likely to agree in finding casual scintillations of polemic in a work that does not profess to be controversial, and I shall not pretend to prove that he wrote the 'Cave of the Nymphs' as an attack upon the Gnostics. I shall, however, argue in the first part of the paper that certain features of his treatise would have found their way there more easily because they had been prominent in his dealings with this sect. In the second part I shall suggest that he meant to write, not only a work of interpretation, but a manual for interpreters, and one that might be construed as a tacit reprimand to teachers who purported, like the Gnostics, to arrive at truth without the aid of other men's endeavours.

I. Porphyry attached two names to Enneads 2.9, as he did to all his master's treatises[5]. The first was 'Against the Gnostics', the second 'Against those who say that the Demiurge and his universe are evil.' The latter is thus supposed to represent the defining tenet of the Gnostics. Ecclesiastical writers of the same period (Irenaeus, Tertullian, Clement, Origen and Hippolytus) corroborate this usage[6]. A Gnostic is one who holds that the highest deity, the Father, is immutable and entirely unconcerned with the material creation. The author of the present world is a purblind god, the Demiurge, brought forth as an abortion when Sophia, an emanation of the Father, tries in vain to usurp his powers. 'Demiurge' is one name of the creator in the 'Timaeus' of Plato, and also of the craftsman who, in chapter after chapter of the Septuagint, provides the chief temptation to idolatry[7]. Born together with matter, he creates the seven planets, whose rulers strive (without success) to imprison the reflection of divinity in the sphere of chance and time[8].

What is true in the doctrine of the Gnostics, says Plotinus, has been stated by the ancients "without pomposity" when they represented the soul's escape from matter as the egress of a prisoner from his cave (Enn. 2.9.6.6–10). It is, of course,

[5] See Vita Plotini 4–6. R. HARDER, Eine Neue Schrift Plotins, Hermes 64 (1936), 1–10 substantiates the chronology, if not the editorial division of treatises.

[6] For a detailed review of the evidence, see M. J. EDWARDS, Gnostics and Valentinians in the Church Fathers, J. Theol. St . 40 (1990) 27–45. This reveals that "Gnostic", a complimentary term desired by every Christian group in Alexandria, was adopted as the proper name of a group of sects, to the indignation of the orthodox party.

[7] See Plato, Timaeus 28b and, for the first recorded Gnosticizing use Valentinus, apud Irenaeum, Adv. Haer. 1.5.1–2. Though the term demiurge appears only at 2Macc. 4.1 in the Septuagint (and then figuratively), denunciations of the idolatrous craftsman are legion: Isaiah 46, Letter of Jeremiah, Daniel 3, Genesis 4.17–22. For the term applied to God see Philo, De Opificio Mundi 171.

[8] See the Nag Hammadi Codex, The Hypostasis of the Archons (Codex II.4.87), discovered c. 1945, and translated by R. A. BULLARD and B. LAYTON in J. M. ROBINSON (ed.), The Nag Hammadi Library in English (Leiden 1988, San Francisco 1990) 163.

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the allegory from Plato's 'Republic' 7 that Plotinus has in mind[9], but he was always happy to see a philosophic truth derived from Homer (Enn. I.6.8, Vita Plotini 15 etc.). The 'Cave of the Nymphs' is Porphyry's illustration of the metaphor commended by his master, taking into account not only Homer's cave, but others which are more obviously symbolic. Without the clue from Plato, it would perhaps have been impossible to detect an arcane significance in Homer; on the other hand, were it not for Homer, Plato would lack the mandate of antiquity, which exemplified its insights both in sculpture and in words (De Antro p. 58.13–18 NAUCK): "The same questions remain for inquiry whether one is searching for the intention of those who established [the cave] or the poet who sets it forth; for it was not the way of ancients to establish sacred precincts without mystical symbols, nor of Homer to describe the without a reason."

Here Porphyry, who maintained elsewhere[10] the presence of divine energies in statues, pays his compliment to the human demiurge. Not only the explicit use of Homer, but the implicit use of all antiquity is the philosopher's prerogative; and in fact the choice of authorities in this work is so unusual as to indicate uncommon circumstances of composition. Widespread as they were, the cult of Mithras and the following of Numenius were among the dubious legacies of eastern Hellenism; it fell to Porphyry, the son of Tyre and child of Athens, to reclaim them for the Platonists, despite the fact that one was called a demiurge, and the other could be charged with an extravagant denigration of the world.

1. It was in the second century that Platonists had begun to take an interest in Mithraica[11], among them (according to Celsus in his attack on Christianity) a diagram which described the ascent of souls through the seven planetary spheres (Origen, Contra Celsum 6.22–23). His aim in citing this was to expose the plagiarism of a Christian group, the Ophites, who appear to have been Gnostics[12], and undoubtedly held the thesis that the author of the present world is evil. Nevertheless, his assumption that the Ophites stole from the Mithraists is questionable. The order of the planets in his allegedly Mithraic diagram follows the days of the week, and forms a ladder to lead the adept out of time into eternity. Among the many depictions of the planets in Mithraic architecture, there is none that shows this plan, and the contempt for time is more at home in Gnostic than in Mithraic speculation[13]. It may be, then, that the Gnostics, who were always prone

[9] See Republic 514ff, and for a review of studies J. MALCOM, The Cave Revisited, Cl. Qu. 31 (1981) 60–68.

[10] See J. BIDEZ, Vie de Porphyre (Ghent 1913) Appendix 1, 3*–23* for edition and commentary of the De Statuis.

[11] See R. TURCAN, Mithras Platonicus (Leiden 1975).

[12] See R. CASEY, Naassenes and Ophites, J. Theol. St. 36 (1935) 45–60.

[13] See M. J. VERMASEREN, A Magical Time-God, in J. R. HINNELLS (ed.), Mithraic Studies (Manchester 1975) Vol II 246–256.

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to reinforce their preaching with allusions to the mysteries[14], had in this case simply fathered their beliefs upon an obscure but growing cult.

Porphyry would have reckoned this a characteristic forgery, together with the Book of Zoroaster which is attested in Gnostic literature, the numerical exposition of the name Mithras by the Gnostic Basilides, and the lion-headed Demiurge who shares his physiognomy with figures in Mithraic iconography[15]. Zoroaster is commended in the 'Cave of the Nymphs', but in the Life of Plotinus his true remains must be distinguished from the forgeries which the Gnostics had made current in that age (Vita Plotini 16)[16]. "In his time there were many Christians of other kinds, but especially some heretics, who began from the ancient philosophy ... bringing forward apocalypses of Zoroaster [etc.] ... But I Porphyry have written many refutations of the Zoroaster, showing that the book is spurious and new, fabricated (πεπλασμενον) by the authors of the heresy to make it seem that the doctrines which they wished to prevail were those of the ancient Zoroaster."

If the word πεπλασμένον is pejorative here for Porphyry, its cognates might seem equally so on a cursory persual of his 'Cave of the Nymphs'. He deprecates the notion that the cave is entirely a plasma of the poet (58.11); admitting that its images or icons are conveyed "as in a mythical fabrication (ἐν μυθοῦ πλάσματι)", he adds that the underlying theme, the hypothesis, would not have been fabricated if the plasma were not informed by certain truths. Only if we grant this can we comprehend the "ancient wisdom" present in the Odyssean verses; here, as in his chapter on the Gnostics, fabrication is deceptive, while antiquity is the guarantee of truth.

But as we have seen, antiquity could produce an edifying fabrication. Mithras in the 'Cave of the Nymphs' is a Persian deity, spoken of in the works of Zoroaster, whose mysteries release the soul from a world of his own creation. This world is not so much evil as defective, its tenants not so much prisoners as athletes, and its contents rather parables than lies (De Antro 60.4–11)[17]:

"Thus also Persians perfect the initate by mystically illustrating the descent and subsequent egress of the soul, calling space a cave. First, as Eubulus says, Zoroaster hallowed a natural cave ... in honour of Mithras, the maker and father of all. The cave bore for him an icon of the cosmos, which Mithras created (ἐδημιούργησεν). The contents carried symbols, at proportioned intervals, of the cosmic elements and climes."

In this passage (adduced by H. CHADWICK to corroborate the evidence of Celsus on the Ophites[18]), Mithras shares the appellation "maker and father of all" with Plato's Demiurge at Tim. 28c. Platonists agreed that it was the the goodness

[14] See M. MARCOVICH, Hippolytus: Refutatio Omnium Haeresium (Berlin 1986) 36–38.

[15] See further M. J. EDWARDS, Gnostic Eros and Orphic Themes, Z.P.E. 88 (1991) 25–40.

[16] For the translation see EDWARDS (1990) and JACKSON (1990), cited in n. 3 supra.

[17] See TURCAN (n. 11 above) 23–43 on Porphyry's sources.

[18] H. CHADWICK, Origen: Contra Celsum (Cambridge 1953) 334 n. 2, somewhat inaccurately rendered.

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of the latter that induced him to shape an image of eternity in space and time, since nothing could be better than that everything should attain the highest excellence that is proper to its kind. Plotinus, however, testifies that aversion to the Demiurge made the Gnostics both contemptuous and fearful of his most beautiful creation (Enn. 2.9.131–6): "The critic of the nature of the cosmos does not know what he does, nor where this rashness of his is leading. But this [must be said], that they do not know the order of first, second and third things in their sequence down to the last, and that one ought not to revile what is worse than the first, but peaceably excuse the nature of all things, looking at the first things and putting a stop to the tragedy of the terrors which they locate in the cosmic spheres".

Both this complaint and the currency of a Book of Zoroaster in Gnostic circles are confirmed by the Apocryphon of John, which, being extant in three Coptic versions and a Latin paraphrase, was perhaps the most well-known of Gnostic texts[19]. According to this, the spirit of man is heavenly, but his flesh, his hylic body, is a creation of seven archons, who are evidently the rulers of the planets and of the week. Their acolytes, equal in number to the days of the year, complete the anatomy and instil the passions, but the tale is not yet done (Nag Hammadi Codex 2.1.19.1–10): "This is the number of angels: together they are 365. They all worked on it until, limb for limb, the natural and material body was completed by them. Now there are other ones in charge over the remaining passions, whom I did not mention to you. But if you wish to know them, it is written in the book of Zoroaster."

The Demiurge of the Platonists worked from knowledge of the paradigm. but the Demiurge of the Gnostics tries to ape the indestructible ones who dwell beyond his vision. (NHC 2.1.13.2-5). Thus he neither makes nor merits an icon, being a shadow or eidolon, and indeed the merest "shadow of a shadow" (Enn. 2.9.10). He is engendered by the reflection of the intellect when it falls into a subjacent realm of matter, which, if transiently illuminated, is not thereby redeemed (Enn. 2.9.10.19–31): "For they say that soul inclined below and a certain wisdom (Sophia), whether the soul began it or Sophia was that cause, or they wish both to be the same; saying that the other souls and members of wisdom came down with them, they say that these put on bodies, such as those of men. But she on whose account they came down, they say again, did not come down, but merely illuminated the darkness, then from that an eidolon came into being from matter, Then, fabricating (πλασάντες) an eidolon of an eidolon here somehow out of matter or materiality or whatever they choose to call it, saying now this, now that, and using many other names to darken what they mean, they generate their so-called demiurge."

Plotinus will go some way with the Gnostics, but no further; for the rest, they are responsible for the shadowy fabrication that they purport to be describing. Matter in the Enneads is the effect of an eternal, not a temporal or capricious

[19] See ROBINSON (n. 8 above) 124–125.

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generation, perpetually illumined by the procreative soul. Source of evil it may be through its lack of formal properties, but evil has no origin or being independent of the good. As for beauty, that distracts the ascending soul and makes it fall in love with its own reflection[20]; but that is not to deny that it is right to project this image on to matter, and it is only the Gnostic pessimist who thinks the reflection culpable, a false light on the surface of an uncomprehending world.

Versions of the Gnostic myth occur in which Sophia is first enticed by the reflection of her divinity in matter, then enveloped in the darkness[21]. Plotinus may allude to this conceit in his earliest treatise[22], and Porphyry speaks, in the 'Cave of the Nymphs', of a danger that the eye will be seduced in its contemplation of the cave (De Antro 59.21–5): "On this account the cave may thus be properly called delightful when one first approaches it, because of its partaking in the forms; but it is misty to one who looks at what is beneath it and enters into that with his mind."

Porphyry's observer, who sees first beauty then obscurity, might seem about to repeat the Gnostic fall. The difference is that in Porphyry the detection of the shadow is the beginning of enlightenment, for matter has no captivating power. Matter in Neoplatonism is neither mere negation nor an independent principle of evil, but an attenuated shadow of the Good. In the 'Cave of the Nymphs' it is a necessary element in a blend of light and shadow, never seen but through the mediated presence of the forms (De Antro 59.18–21): "Because of matter, then, the cave is misty and dark, but through the cosmetic activity of the interwoven form (whence indeed it is called the cosmos) it is beautiful and lovely."

Thus Mithras and his worshippers are vindicated; craftsmanship, divine or human, need not be idolatry, so long as we perceive the enlightening form within the work.

2. For Porphyry's account of the descent and return of souls within the cosmos, the proof-texts are the Odyssey and Plato's Myth of Er in 'Republic' 10. The earliest philosopher to combine these ancient touchstones with the name of Zoroaster was Numenius of Apamea, who lived in the second century A.D[23]. For anyone embattled with the Gnostics, it was expedient to show that one could quote this great precursor without embarrassment, for while he enjoyed the qualified respect of the Neoplatonists, he seems, to have maintained, like any Gnostic, that the world had been projected into pre-existent matter by a schism in the divine

[20] See Enneads 5.5.12; M. J. EDWARDS, Middle Platonism on the Beautiful and the Good, Mnemosyne 44 (1991) 161–167.

[21] See Hermetica 1 (Poimandres) 14, with H. JONAS, The Gnostic Religion (Boston 1958) 146–173. the text states that the Anthropos who had charge of the mortal world inspired the world with love for him for casting his reflection; then "seeing his own likeness in it, in the water, he fell in love and desired to dwell there; and with the desire came the act."

[22] See Enneads 1.6.8, which is sometimes thought to refer to Narcissus, sometimes to the Gnostics. For the latter view see W. BOUSSET, Hauptprobleme der Gnosis (Göttingen 1907) 207.

[23] On his conjunction of the Myth of Er with Homer see J. DILLON, The Middle Platonists (London 1977) 375–6 and Numenius, Frs 30-35 DES PLACES.

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(Fr. 11 DES PLACES): "The first and second god, however, make one; but, being drawn towards matter, which is a dyad, it unites it but is torn apart by it because of its concupiscent and fluid nature".

The cause of the world is therefore, like Sophia, an emanation of divinity, which falls through its attraction to a pre-existent matter, and is constantly essaying to restore the broken harmony. We need not review the affinities which scholars have observed between the teaching of Numenius and those of Gnostic groups[24], except for the one that is most germane to Porphyry's allegorical speculation in this treatise. He is the one Greek author who informs us that Numenius took Odysseus as a symbol of the imprisoned soul in quest of its deliverance (De Antro 79.19-20 = Numenius, Fr. 33); he reproduces also his citation of the Odyssean verses which refer to a people of dreams (Od. ω 12 at De Antro 75.11ff). Numenius takes this phrase to mean, not the dead, but the blind majority of the living; it can hardly be an accident that the same phrase is adopted, with a like interpretation, by the Naassenes, a curious Gnostic group of the second century[25], who pre-empt the Neoplatonists by giving an allegorical veneer to sordid myths. Although it cannot be shown that either party was so early or so eminent as to be a likely model for the other, it is fair to conclude that the Gnostics and Numenius drew from a common intellectual reservoir.

So great was the indebtedness of Plotinus to Numenius that it was said to amount to plagiarism (Vita Plotini 17.1ff), and Porphyry was, if anything, more beholden than his master. Apart from his three citations of Numenius in the 'Cave of the Nymphs', he may have relied upon him for his knowledge of the old mythographers[26]. His distinction between the doors of gods and mortals in the 'Cave of the Nymphs' is based expressly on Numenius' teaching that the soul, after passing through the seven planets, comes to earth by way of Cancer and returns through Capricorn (Fr. 31 DES PLACES = De Antro 70.25–72.19). The Gnostics traced a similar path, ascribing a new malignity to the planets[27]. If Porphyry was to build with these ancestral stones, it had to be in such a way as to leave no room for error; the doctrines of Numenius must stand square with a Plotinian cosmogony, in which matter is eternally instinct with the marks of beauty, and the place of the soul's detention is the means of its ascent.

[24] See DILLON (op. cit., n. 23) 376; M. J. EDWARDS, Atticizing Moses? Numenius and the Jews, Vigiliae Christianae 44 (1990) 64–75.

[25] See Hippolytus, Refutatio V.7.37 for the quotation; EDWARDS (n. 24 supra) for discussion of its relation to Numenius; CASEY (n.. 12 supra) on the Naassenes. For the citation in Numenius see also R. LAMBERTON, Homer the Theologian (Berkeley 1986) 54–77.

[26] See M. J. EDWARDS, Numenius, Pherecydes and the *'Cave of the Nymphs'*, Cl. Qu. 40 (1990) 258–62. His citations of Numenius in the De Abstinentia are at 63.10ff (Fr. 30 DES PLACES), 70.26 (Fr. 31) and 79.19ff (Fr. 33); the edition of E. DES PLACES (Paris 1973) adds the reference to Pythagoras at 75.11 as Fr. 32.

[27] See Origen, Contra Celsum 6.22, quoted above. At Hermetica 1.25 the ascending soul returns its vices to the seven planets.

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II. The 'Cave of the Nymphs' is itself a proof that theological arguments in the third century rested equally on logic and authority. Allegory was a versatile expedient by which anyone could procure an ancient witness, and if an author wanted proof that he had a better claim to use this instrument, he would naturally look for it in the words of his chosen text. Most frequently the proof would be a symbol that the commentator identified and glossed on his own behalf: the text itself, he would argue, held the key to a more profound interpretation of its contents. For a Platonist, the similes of enlightenment in the dialogues – of "turning the eye of the soul" or seeing the sun – may express the desired experience of the student as he reads them[28]; taken in due sequence, the dialogues will illustrate our progress from the lowest to the highest grades of virtue[29]; much is hidden, but even while his logic is ambiguous, Parmenides' return upon his argument attests his faith in the ultimate reversion of the many to the One[30].

Plotinus was as ready as the Christians to accuse his Gnostic rivals of perverting ancient sources. Plat. Tim. 39e was the support for their distinction between the mind at rest, the mind in contemplation and the mind as demiurge[31]. Plotinus hints that other ancient symbols were abused to express and vindicate their hatred of the world (Enn. 2.9.6): "For they manufacture these doctrines as though they were not in contact with the ancient thought of the Greeks; for the Greeks knew, and spoke clearly without pomposity, of ascents from the cave, coming closer and closer by gradual stages to a truer vision."

The aim is thus to approach "by gradual stages", not to grasp the truth at once; nothing is revealed at once for Neoplatonism, either in life or in a text. Plotinus seems to insinuate here that the Gnostics stole from Plato, whose well-known (if perplexing) use of allegory would justify their own resort to symbols. Porphyry's task was harder, since, in making the cave of Ithaca the subject of his treatise, he was required to demonstrate first that it contained an allegory, and secondly that he knew best how to read it.

As we have seen, one key to a hidden meaning is the antiquity of Homer, which is equally significant if he did not invent, but reproduced his model: "it was not the way of Homer to describe without a reason" (58.18; see above). Novelty (καινοτομία) is the matrix of vain teaching in the Gnostics, says Plotinus (Enn. 2.9.6.11 etc.); his student affirms the converse, that the ancients never did anything in vain. Anything in Homer that does not explain itself will not be otiose, but a

28 See the anonymous Prolegomena to Plato in C. F. HERMANN's edition of Plato Vol VI (Leipzig 1874) 206.20ff.

29 See the Isagoge of Albinus in HERMANN (n. 28 supra) Vol VI

30 See Proclus, Theologica Platonica 2.12.

31 See Enneads 2.9.6.17-19, and, for interpretations of the Platonic passage, A.-J. FESTUGIÈRE, La revelation d'Hermes Trismegiste, Vol II (Paris 1954) 275-296.

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crux for the enlightened commentator. If the cave is a sacred precinct[32], then the reader is an initiate and the expositor a priest.

Such claims, although they justify the commentator, require him to absolve the text from a charge of being needlessly obscure. This was Plato's verdict on the allegories which the sophists found in ancient myths[33], and also the sentence passed by other critics on his own[34]. In the 'Cave of the Nymphs', the hermeneutic crux is the quotation from the 'Republic' of that parable in which a man progresses from the observation of shadows cast by eikones to the direct observation of the sun. Porphyry quotes the response of Glaucon – "what a prodigious eikon!" (Rep. 514a, De Antro 62.4) – and takes this as accrediting his own view that the wisdom of the ancients could be iconically embedded in a cave.

The difficulty of interpreting the classics arises, not from the perversity of authors, but from the distance between all literature and truth. In the 'Phaedrus' writing, like a picture, is the mute and defective likeness of a superior concept[35]. This gulf between words and things is an impediment to knowledge, since Plato makes it an axiom that each degree of knowledge has its correlated object[36]. In the 'Cratylus', he toys with, but does not endorse, the theory of a natural affinity between the words of Greek and their correlatives; even the most ingenious etymologies of his followers did not conceal the presence of an arbitrary component in all the languages of man[37]. The recurrence of the same metaphors in the 'Phaedrus' and the 'Timaeus' may imply that speech and matter are analogous: just as the finished text may be an icon of reality, so the one created world is an εἰκών of its paradigm; and the intelligence that disseminates the seeds of truth in writing is itself a seed of deity, implanted in the world by lesser gods[38].

Words and matter are therefore both receptacles, both necessary and insufficient vehicles of knowledge. But if language is to convey a truth, it must be understood. The speech of the gods is inaccessible to us[39], but we have at least the noble and dignified utterances of past philosophers. The Gnostics would appear to

[32] For the analogy see De Abstinentia 60.15 etc. For poems as temples cf. Pindar, Ol. 6.1-40; for poet as priest cf. Callimachus, Hymn 2.1 and Horace, Odes 3.1.1–4.

[33] See e.g. Phaedrus 229c-230a, where the word ἀτυφοῦ may have suggested Plotinus' ἀτύφως at Enn. 2.9.6.8.

[34] See Proclus, In Rem Publicam Vol II 96.2-109.3 KROLL (for Epicurean attacks on the Myth of Er); Dionysius of Halicarnassus, Ad Pompeium 2 (for the obscurities of Plato).

[35] Phaedrus 275. See further H. WILMS, EIKON: Eine begriffsgeschichtliche Untersuchung zum Platonismus, Vol I (Münster 1935) 1–34.

[36] As is clear from the discussion of the orders of knowledge and being at Rep. 477a–480a. See further J. ANNAS, An Introduction to Plato's *Republic* (Cambridge 1981) 190-216.

[37] See M. HIRSCHLE, Sprachphilosophie und Namenmagie im Neuplatonismus, Beiträge zur Klassischen Philologie 96 (Meisenheim 1979) 4–35.

[38] See Phaedrus 276 and Timaeus 41; J. DERRIDA, Disseminations (Eng. trans. Chicago 1981) 160–163.

[39] For allusions to this recurrent term in Homer see Cratylus 391e–392a.

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reject both principles: argument is waived in favour of "hissings and incantations" (Enn. 2.9.14.5-6), and the works of Plato and Homer are superseded by unknowns. Porphyry (Vita Plotini 16) supplies their names: Allogenes, Messos, Nicotheus, Zostrianus and the spurious Zoroaster[40]. The superficial justice of these charges is confirmed by Coptic texts, the Zostrianus and Allogenes, which are wholly revelatory in character and abound in strings of lettering[41], as senseless and haphazard as those which punctuate the magical papyri , with the same intent of proving that the visionary, unlike the mere philosopher, has already acquired the language of the gods.

Just as matter does not support a natural theology for the Gnostics, so the classics cannot point to truth. Porphyry, as we have seen, allows that wisdom may be embodied either in books or in the artefacts that the books describe: the ancients wrote in stone as well as paper and in artefacts as easily as in words. It is therefore not surprising that perception within the cave should be dependent on the skill of the perceiver (De Antro 65.6–8): "But to souls who are being perfected in nature and to natal demons the cosmos is holy and lovely, though dark and misty."

The Gnostics would have scoffed at Porphyry's sharing his interpretative privilege with the demons. For Neoplatonism the natal demon is the minister to whom the soul must pay its debts for the wrongs of previous lives[42]. According to Plotinus he is the ruler of a star and the custodian of a person's higher self (Enn. 3.4). The Gnostics, we are told, malign the stars with "a tragedy of terrors" (Enn. 2.9.13.7), and no doubt they would have ranked the natal demon with those planetary archons whom their "hissings and incantations" put to flight (Enn. 2.9.14.5–6 above). For seekers who desired an immediate audience with the Godhead, there was no work for the lesser deities, just as there was no authority in the human word.

Vision is the favoured metaphor in Platonism for the intellection of form behind phenomena[43]. Homer, in a parenthesis that Porphyry does not mention, says that the cave is θαῦμα ἰδέσθαι, a marvel to behold[44]. There was indeed no need to quote a phrase that was the keynote of his treatise, which interprets the cave primarily as an object before the mind. Our previous discussion shows it to

[40] On the identification of these, see now M. J. EDWARDS (1990) and H. M. JACKSON (1990), cited in n. 3 supra.

[41] See Zostrianus (Nag Hammadi Codex 8.1) 52.17, 118.20 and 127.1–5 and the list of names at Allogenes (NHC 11.3) 54.17–22. These appear as ROBINSON (n. 8 supra) 417, 427, 429, 495. On the magical import of Hebrew names see Origen, Contra Celsum 5.45; on the power of meaningless names see [Iamblichus], De Mysteriis 7.4–5.

[42] See Iamblichus, De Mysteriis 9, and M. J. EDWARDS, Two Images of Pythagoras, in H. J. BLUMENTHAL and E. G. CLARK (eds). The Divine Iamblichus, 164-165.

[43] See Rep. 507c-509b; E. KEULS, Plato and Greek Painting (Leiden 1978) 33–35.

[44] Though Od. 14.108 is cited at De Antro 55.9.

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be, not only a landmark, but a means of patient access to a higher plane of vision; it is the mind and not the body that is said to penetrate its dark foundations, and the paradox for the senses, that the cave is at the same time dark and pleasant, is resolved for the intellect by its apprehension that the beauty of phenomena is always a simultaneous revelation and concealment of the forms.

The cave, according to Porphyry, is both fluid and hard (62.16–17: ἀντίτυπον καὶ ῥευστόν) . To the adjective ἀντίτυπος corresponds the noun ἀντιτυπία, which according to Plotinus is a catchword of the Gnostics (Enn. 2.9.6.1–2). Denoting both reflectiveness and solidity, the term is used by Platonists of things in the world, to imply that the forms are mirrored by the objects which they fail to penetrate[45]. If we judge, however, by the terms that Plotinus cites as its congeners, this word in Gnostic speech has no application to the physical, but only to an ephemeral condition of the soul[46]. For Porphyry the "antitypical" nature is in matter, and the soul is the recipient of eidola, which if rightly used will lead it back to knowledge (64.20); in Gnostic thought, the demiurge, the εἴδωλον of an εἴδωλον, is the child of an erring soul (Enn. 2.9.10.27, as above).

The cave, as the seat of mundane ἀντιτυπία, is a subject of cognition, transcended in the very act by which it is understood. The symbol of the desired illumination is the olive above the cave, which is for Porphyry the immediate goal of Odysseus' approach (De Antro 80.8–9): "Therefore the seat beneath the olive is proper to him as the suppliant of the god".

This god is Athena, patroness of wisdom, whose aid is as necessary to the reader as to the hero. On its first appearance, it is a symbol to the reader that an allegory is needed to elucidate the text (De Antro 57. 17–21): "The discussion of these obscurities is sufficient; the passage is not a fabrication (πλάσμα) to charm the soul, nor does it contain the description of a locality, but the poet is using it as the instrument of some allegory, mystically putting near it the olive plant."

The clause about the olive is attached to the foregoing proposition in such a way as to suggest that it is intended as the proof of it; it is thus a sign to the reader about the nature of the text. Within the text, it is equally a sign that the cave is not the work of chance (De Antro 78.8–13): "It did not flourish there, as one might think, through some chance, but contains in itself the riddle of the cave. Since, then, the cosmos did not come into being at random or for no reason, but is the perfect work of divine forethought and intellectual nature, by the icon of the cosmos, the cave, has been planted the symbol of divine forethought – the olive."

Since Homer did not write at hazard, he depicts a cave which was itself a work of providence and the image of a providential world. The olive functions therefore

[45] See M. J. EDWARDS, The Gnostic Aculinus: A Study in Platonism, in Studia Patristica 24 (1993) 380, citing Damascius, Vita Isidori 154.11 WESTERMANN and [Iamblichus], De Mysteriis 217.14 PARTHEY.

[46] At Enn. 2.9.6.1 we find metanoia (repentance) and paroikesis (exile), the first of which must refer to the soul's activity in salvation, the second to its present earthbound state.

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as the lodestar of philosophy in two respects: in the quest for truth in nature, and in the derivation of meaning from a text. Perusal of a text can raise the mind from earth to heaven; but, since the text itself is among the earthly things, a parable of the mind's ascent from matter will also function as a metaphor for its sublimation of the written word.

Odysseus and the reader are both suppliants at the olive, but the latter at least must supplicate, not only Athena but his natal demon. To appease this god is not a work of hermeneutic subtlety, but of spiritual endeavour; or rather, there can be no separation of the two (De Antro 80.8–21): "The seat beneath the olive is also appropriate to him both as a suppliant to Athena and as one whose supplication appeases his natal demon. For one cannot be rid of this sensory life forthwith by blinding it [sc. as Odysseus blinded the Cyclops, son of Poseidon], and striving to be free at once. The one who attempts this is followed by the wrath of marine and material deities, who should first be appeased by sacrifices and beggars' toils and endurances, sometimes fighting the passions, sometimes charming and deceiving and adopting all changes towards them, in order that, stripped of one's rags, one may destroy them all; and not even thus be free from toils, but only when one is absolutely remote from the sea and ignorant of the works of sea and matter."

It may be observed that suicide, the means of emancipation which is rejected by this passage[47], was the course denied to Porphyry by his master, yet commended by the same man to the Gnostics : "If you are killed, you have what you wish, and if you complain, you are not compelled to go on being a citizen" (Enn. 2.9.9.16–17). The true escape is a training in philosophy, since to be a man of knowledge is to be a man of virtue; as Socrates declared, we cannot liberate the soul until we have turned its eye (Rep. 533d). Porphyry implies that moral progress is required to achieve the insight represented by the olive, for the suppliant must make his peace with the gods of the sea before he wins the favour of Athena. At the same time, he intimates, by putting the olive both at the beginning and at the end of his discussion, that knowledge must continue to increase as the condition for the pursuit and apprehension of the Good.

The Gnostics of Plotinus are wholly ignorant of this truth, and are caricatured as saying (Enn. 2.9.9.56–9): "You are a son of God, but the others, whom you admire, are not sons, nor have received from fathers what they honour, but you, without labour, are superior to the heavens."

Porphyry's method differs absolutely from the arrogant logomachy of the Gnostics, who believe, not in appeasing nature, but only in escaping it. They are so far from acknowledging the role of moral effort that the fact of initiation is enough, in their eyes, to make them already superior to the gods. The cave shows

47 See Vita Plotini 11. with Enn. 1.9; F. CUMONT, Comment Plotin detourna Porphyre de suicide, R.E.G. 32 (1919) 113–120; R. GOULET, Variations Romanesques sur la Melancolie de Porphyre, Hermes 110 (1982) 443–457.

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us that matter is eternally redeemable, that wisdom is a process of laborious discovery in which ancient hands direct the modern eye.

Porphyry concludes with a comparison foreshadowed at the beginning of his study. The poet is like an artisan who causes amorphous matter to partake of truth as the cave partakes of form (De Antro 81.6–8): "For Homer could not have fabricated the whole theme without transforming the fabrication in the light of certain truths." This sentence follows hard on his exhortation to ascend from the realm of matter to that of intellect. In the final sentence the cave itself is spoken of in terms that pertain to matter (81.9–10):

"As to the underlying (ὑποκειμένου) cave the work of interpretation finishes here." The participle ὑποκειμένος signifies three things to a philosopher: the material substratum of existents, the subject of a treatise and the subject of a logical proposition. As Aristotle noted, this is not an accidental homonymity, for the subject of a treatise is its "matter", by the converse of that metaphor which treats matter as the "subject" of a form (Eth. Nich. 1094b12, 1098a28). For Porphyry the meaning on the surface of a text is always open to discerning transformation, since it is, like any icon, both symbolic of and other than the truth that it mediates. If he did not compose it for the Gnostics, he composed this work for anyone who did not yet know that reading is an essay in the improvement of the self[48].

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